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STAT

THE VIEWS OF A SOVIET DEFECTOR

What is interesting about Mr Dzhirkvelov, the Soviet defector whom we have been interviewing over the past week, is that he seems a very ordinary product of the Soviet apparatus in every respect except that he defected. He worked his way dutifully up the ladder under Stalin, suffered the now familiar loss of illusions when Stalin was discredited, and then served on with waning belief to achieve a modest level of success. He was neither a dissident nor a great artist. He had no big secrets to sell, nor any visible sense of mission. He cannot have any hopes of great riches in the west. He defected only when the system seemed to be closing against him to deny him the prospects which he felt were his due after long and loyal service. A sense of personal injustice, a desire to go on living in the west, and a basic lack of faith in what he was doing seem to have been sufficient to bring him to the decision. In a way, he is fleeing not from neo-Stalinism but from the absence of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, from the loss of purpose, order and discipline. There was simply nothing to hold his loyalty once his career was at an end.

In all this there is a lot that is typical, even if his decision to defect was not, but even that decision is revealing, for it exposes the hollow core that is now at the centre of the Soviet system. As Mr Dzhirkvelov describes it, and his account is confirmed by others, the Soviet Union is now run by an "aristocracy of bureaucrats" — a body of careerists without principles or faith. This should be better than the savage zeal of the Stalin era,

though Mr Dzhirkvelov seems only half in agreement, but it makes for a system with profound and growing internal weaknesses. Creativity and initiative are stifled, innovation is held back, and the top level of the apparatus is increasingly isolated from reality by the self-serving tendency of the lower levels to pass upwards information which it believes the top level wants to hear. The bringers of good news are more likely to be promoted than the bringers of bad.

This means that large and small decisions are often made on the basis of distorted information, and over-optimistic assumptions. Mr Dzhirkvelov cites examples from his African experience which show Moscow badly out of touch with reality, but there must be many others. Almost certainly, for instance, the decision to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968 was based on information which underplayed the support for Mr Dubcek and exaggerated the dangers of instability. Probably the invasion of Afghanistan was based on similarly over-optimistic assumptions about the ease with which the country could be subjugated. On a more general level there are plenty of examples of Soviet officials conspicuously failing to understand the workings of the American political system. And even if the leadership gets accurate information on the catastrophic state of the Soviet economy it is so insulated from reality by its own privileges that it probably cannot entirely grasp the truth.

The implications of this for the west are worrying for a number of different but related

reasons. First, a country which bases its policies on a distorted view of the world, and which may not be fully informed about itself, is inevitably dangerous and difficult to deal with. Secondly, a country expanding from an empty core is more dangerous than a country which still believes in itself. For a communist state, in particular, a firm belief in the scientific laws of history will tend to make for patience, since there is no need to take risks if history is on one's side, but when faith weakens the temptation increases to prop it up by demonstrating forcibly that communism is on the march. Otherwise the legitimacy of the entire system can be questioned. To a great extent it is not communist zeal but the crumbling of that zeal which drives the Soviet Union to expand its influence abroad. Thirdly, when the ruling elite of an imperial power begins to doubt its right to rule, and to rule only to preserve itself, rot has set in.

As Mr Dzhirkvelov says, something must happen. But, as he also suggests, there are dangers in both directions of change — in tighter controls and in greater democratization. There is no obvious way out. This, too, increases the dangers ahead, for even a new leadership, which anyway will have earned its promotion by deference to the existing order, will have no clear answers in sight. It will be under the same pressures and the same handicaps as the present leadership and possibly under still greater temptation to try to escape them by taking risks abroad.